



# Bridging the Digital Divide in Northeastern Brazil

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As information technology continues to evolve at a dizzying pace, large segments of society are being left behind. This phenomenon, called digital exclusion, is particularly pronounced in developing countries, where limited infrastructure and low literacy and education levels contribute to the technological disparity. Closing the digital divide may begin with providing wider access to information resources such as the Internet, but how people apply the information they glean is equally important. Projects that incorporate strategies addressing both issues have the best chance of sustained success.

## Ação Digital Nordeste

The Brazilian Northeast, home to more than half of all Brazilians living in poverty, is one of the most underprivileged regions in Latin America. Frequent drought and lack of basic services such as electricity, potable water and education complicate development efforts. In 2002 the Inter-American Foundation awarded \$227,635 to Rede de Informações para o Terceiro Setor (RITS), a Brazilian nonprofit organization, toward its work promoting digital inclusion in the Northeast. Through the project Ação Digital Nordeste, RITS, with additional support from IBM, will provide computer equipment, training and Internet access to 40 nongovernmental organizations and base groups serving low-income communities.

### Serving Women in Pernambuco

Centro das Mulheres de Palmares (CMP), a women's network in the municipality of Palmares, Pernambuco, will soon own a computer, thanks to the winning application its staff submitted to RITS' competition.

Currently, CMP relies on a nearby cyber-café for all digital needs. Damiana Eugenia de Sales Aleixo, the group's director, is eager to begin training to set up CMP's Web site and expanding the Center's dissemination. She also looks forward a more efficient work day. Owning a computer will allow staff to focus precious time and resources on furthering CMP's mission of empowering disadvantaged women and supporting their participation in cultural activities.

Project beneficiaries were selected through an open, competitive process based on their statements of how computer and Internet access would strengthen their organizations' work. The 40 successful applicants were evaluated by a committee representing RITS, IBM, Oxfam and ABONG, which gave preference to groups with little or no previous computing experience but with creative and well considered plans for use of the new equipment and skills. RITS' award package consists of one new IBM computer and printer, 70 hours of training on software, including basic Web design for up to four staff members, technical support and one year of subsidized Internet access and RITS membership. The project envisions home pages as a platform to improve the democratic participation of low-income Northeasterners and their access to the programs that serve them.

## What is RITS?

RITS, founded in 1997, is a virtual network that enables civil society organizations to share information, knowledge and technical resources by affording its members an interactive forum through the Internet. Since its inception, RITS has acted as a modernizing force for the third sector while promoting the common objectives of NGOs and base groups in Brazil and abroad. More than 250 organizations are currently members of the network, and *Revista do Terceiro Setor* (RETS), the organization's online newsletter, has more than 25,000 subscribers. RITS has successfully implemented technology programs for a variety of national organizations and international partners including IAF grantee Asociación

Latinamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción (ALOP) in Costa Rica. RITS also supports Voto Ético, a Brazilian government project aimed at raising awareness of the importance of voting conscientiously. RITS plans to create a portal for consolidation of Brazil-specific information on digital inclusion and public policies that affect access to technology. At the World Social Forum 2003, Carlos Afonso, RITS director of technology, participated in a panel on new technologies and strategies for digital inclusion and social transformation. RITS has provided technical services at all three World Social Forum meetings. For more on RITS log onto <[www.rits.org.br](http://www.rits.org.br)>.

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